

Guest Editorials

Telehealth

YVAN SOUARÈS*

Greetings!

In the Pacific, as much as in the rest of the world, telehealth has become a very popular concept in the past few years. From concept to practice, where are we now?

As a new but wide field of application in health services development, telehealth is being actively explored in the Pacific Islands in many different ways, in a broad range of specialties and by many stakeholders. In fact, telehealth rightly catches the attention of all parties involved in health services development, across the specialties, the disciplines and the sectors e.g. human and animal health practitioners, researchers, managers, governments, donors, regional and international technical agencies, NGOs, private companies, the media and the public. The actual plethora of telehealth projects and meetings, of telemedicine press clippings and publications, of virtual conferences, cyber-schools, training web sites and the like, probably reflects the "new craze" status of the concept; but certainly more than that as well! We, at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community SPC (formerly the South Pacific Commission) share, with most of the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network stakeholders, the view that the practice of appropriate telehealth applications may represent a real opportunity for public health development in Pacific communities. Obviously, this vision is also common to all those who have contributed to the present issue of *Pacific Health Dialog*.

But who does what? Which of the many we can think of, are the appropriate telehealth applications for the Pacific? Who can effectively access all such promising wonders and how

do telehealth, telemedicine and "teletraining" possibly impact on health services delivery and development?

The pandemic expansion of the Internet triggered the global booming of the E-commerce... should we perceive telehealth as the mere expression of a booming E-health? Should we expect the same inequities in sharing accessibility and profits? Fashions tend to emphasise the form over the purpose: what about telehealth in the long run? What exactly is telemedicine compare to telehealth? Have we, in the Pacific, discovered distance education with the advent of the Internet? Are there any practitioners' testimonies available, research findings, project reports or case studies applying to this range of issues?

In this issue of *Pacific Health Dialog* a wide range of Pacific view points are compiled, in order to take stock of telehealth experiences and projects existing in the Pacific, especially in the Islands, and to give the floor to those who practice telehealth in the region.



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In April 1997, the Western Pacific HealthNet and PACNET started operating simultaneously. These were the first two regional telehealth applications for the Pacific. Both took off well and have since expanded their respective memberships and scopes of service. In December 1998, the Pacific Basin Medical Association (PBMA) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), which respectively established the WPHNet and PACNET, jointly convened a Pacific Telehealth Conference at the SPC headquarters in Noumea, New Cal-

edonia. This meeting gathered about 80 participants from all over the Pacific, many from the islands of the Pacific. All came to exchange about telehealth advances and prospects in relation with health services delivery and development for the Pacific. In a sometimes updated version, their contributions form the core of the following pages.

Be all ears and eyes wide open: let's carry on this Pacific telehealth dialog!

All the best to PHD and to you all.

*Dr Yvan Souarès, Epidemiologist, SPC, Noumea, New Cal- edonia

GUEST EDITORIALS